

# Carrot or Stick?

By Chris Wichman

*A mix of both will help build a safety culture within your transit agency.*

**A** primary operational goal of any successful transit agency is to provide a safe experience for its riders. The key to developing and meeting program safety objectives is a deep organizational commitment to safe practices. It is the responsibility of the transit manager to provide opportunities for ongoing safety training and ways to motivate drivers and staff to meet program safety goals.

The recently-released TCRP Synthesis 97, *Improving Bus Transit Safety through Rewards and Discipline*, provides an overview of safety program implementation models through a survey of 25 transit agencies across the country. The survey included a range of small to large transit agencies in rural and urban settings, and multimodal systems. The Synthesis documents how bus systems across the country are inspiring an organizational commitment to safety by engaging their workforce. The Synthesis reviews the traditional method of “progressive discipline” to address incidents and accidents, and also the recent growth in employee incentive programs as a complementary tool for improving employee performance. This article will review the best practices for safety presented in TCRP’s Synthesis 97, and provide recommendations and insights specifically geared to rural transit.

## Safety program planning

According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), the primary purpose for the existence of a transit system is to move people safely. The first step toward reaching system safety goals is to identify all potential safety hazards so that they can be resolved or mitigated proactively. The agency manager must then delegate safety-related responsibilities to staff members and provide the resources necessary for each employee to carry out his or her assigned responsibilities.

Ream Lazaro, safety and security consultant/trainer for the CTAA, stated that “although safety is the number-one top priority of transit managers no matter the size of the system, not all transit agencies have the structure or process in place to effectively address that priority.”

Lazaro has three recommendations for creating such a structure:

**1) Designate one employee as program safety officer**—whether it is the agency manager or otherwise, to be the point person for safety-related policy inquiries or concerns.

**2) Establish a communication process for safety policies and concerns.** This can be formal, such as an internal safety committee, or an informal open-door policy with the program safety officer.

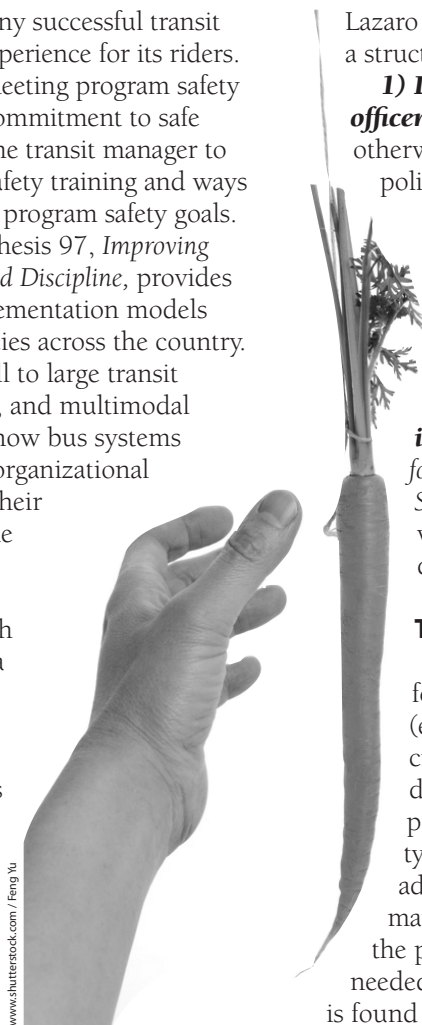
**3) Adopt a System Safety Program Plan (SSPP) to incorporate safety expectations into official agency policy.** APTA’s *Manual for the Development of Bus Transit System Safety Program Plans* can be found at the website: <http://www3.cutr.usf.edu/bussafety/documents/apta-sspp.pdf>.

## The stick: Progressive discipline

Transit agencies must have a process for evaluating and responding to incidents (employee or rider injuries) and vehicular crashes. First, a formal investigation must be done to decide if the incident or crash was preventable. In smaller agencies this is typically completed by one or more agency administrators (e.g. the director or operations manager), who examine the incident report, the police report, and any other information needed to conduct the investigation. If the incident is found to have been preventable, the agency can choose to retrain the individual, or in the case of an egregious error, discipline the individual with either suspension or termination.

Traditionally, transit agencies have used a form of “progressive discipline” as the primary tool to respond to negative employee behaviors. Progressive discipline is a series of consequences that increase in severity over time in an attempt to modify the negative behaviors. According to the TCRP Synthesis 97, this technique is most often used to address poor performance and violations of company policy such as absenteeism and tardiness, but can also be applied to unsafe behaviors.

Larger, urban transit systems are likely to follow a



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formal procedure for disciplinary action agreed upon through collective bargaining with a driver's union. This process would include verbal meetings that are recorded and filed and a written notice with the possibility for suspension or termination of the employee depending on the severity of the offense.

Lazaro pointed out that many smaller, rural systems do not have collectively-bargained employee agreements and therefore have more flexibility to decide how discipline will be applied. Smaller systems may find suspension difficult to implement given already limited staff resources. A written warning may be more appropriate in this setting. Retraining is also a good technique to help ensure future employee compliance. If the offense is found to be egregious and preventable, a rural transit agency may choose to move directly to termination.

### The carrot: Incentive programs

Transit agencies across the country have begun to develop new and innovative safety programs that

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complement traditional progressive discipline tools with employee incentive programs. Incentives are any form of proactive rewards given to staff members who have achieved safety or performance milestones. The TCRP Synthesis 97 found that safety incentive programs are most successful when employees are encouraged to exceed program expectations. Continually setting a higher bar raises employee awareness of their agency's commitment to safety. Incentive programs can engage and educate employees, encourage

positive behavior change, and reward and recognize employees for contributing to a safer work environment.

Some rural transit agencies may be leery of paying for employee incentives while facing tight budgets and increasing operating costs. However, relatively inexpensive approaches can also be effective. "Any incentive is better than nothing, it can come in the form of cash or gifts, but also patches, awards, certificates or public recognition of good performance," said Lazaro.

### Carrot and stick

With progressive discipline alone, employees may begin to think that management only notices when mistakes are made. Incentives allow the transit agency to balance out the stick with a carrot to meet program safety objectives.

The research in the Synthesis showed that agencies that have safety reward programs saw improvements in employee morale and improved employee-employer relationships. The research also found that a majority of survey respondents considered those agencies that combine consistent discipline programs with employee incentives to be good model programs from which to draw new ideas.

One such model program, the Wind River Transportation Authority (WRTA) in Riverton, Wyoming utilizes a progressive discipline process but also recognizes driver safety achievements through a variety of low-cost incentives. For drivers reaching special milestones such as five years of accident-free driving, WRTA treats the staff member to lunch. WRTA also

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### A Few Driver Safety Tips from Ream Lazaro

**Have a "Most Helpful Driver" award.** Typical rural transit drivers, primarily part-timers, retirees and even volunteers, often draw their motivation from the opportunity to help others rather than high wages or job security. Consider tailoring rewards and incentives to what motivates your drivers to excel in safety.

**Meet the riders' needs.** Customers with functional difficulties and elderly riders may require special securement and at times require door-to-door service which, by nature, has greater safety risks. Ensure that all employees are properly trained to assist all passengers with special needs.

**Train and retrain.** To keep driver skills sharp, consider annual behind-the-wheel evaluations and periodic refresher training to revisit the skills of defensive driving, passenger assistance, and emergency response. Ongoing training will remind drivers of the agency's commitment to safety.

### Sources

- Goodwill, Jay, Randall Pine & Amber Reep. (2012). Improving Bus Transit Safety through Rewards and Discipline. TCRP Synthesis 97. <http://www.trb.org/main/blurbs/166870.aspx>
- American Public Transportation Association. (1998). Manual for the Development of Bus Transit System Safety Program Plans. <http://www3.cutr.usf.edu/bussafety/documents/apta-spp.pdf>
- Interview with Ream Lazaro, Safety and Security Consultant/Trainer to the Community Transportation Association of America.

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recognizes employee achievements that are not directly related to safety, however all contribute to an overall culture of excellence and safety. For example, their annual "Clean Bus Award" earns the winning driver a gift certificate to a local restaurant.

### Conclusion

It is the responsibility of every transit agency to provide a safe riding experience to its customers. Each agency will differ in its methods and level of organizational commitment for accomplishing safety goals, but a need across all agencies is a formal disciplinary process to address driver incidents and accidents. Some transit agencies use employee incentives in conjunction with progressive discipline to recognize, motivate, and reinforce the organization's

safety culture. From the findings of TCRP's Synthesis 97, it is evident that agencies incorporating safety incentives find them to be effective tools to improve employee morale, encourage employees to work safely, and improve employee-employer relationships.

Implementing employee incentive programs for rural transit agencies in Kansas should not be abandoned as too costly. Any incentive is better than nothing. Consider finding a local business to sponsor your program. An annual gift certificate to reward safe practices is a good first step toward balancing the stick with a carrot in how you approach safety in your transit agency. ●

## Accessing Public Transit Buses Using a Ramp

*A study funded by the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation is requesting survey participants.*

**Y**ou are invited to participate in a research study by taking an anonymous survey to identify factors that contribute to ramp-related incidents and injuries when entering or exiting a public transit bus using a wheelchair ramp. If you've never experienced a ramp-related incident, we would still like to hear from you, as that is important information too.

If you are 18 years of age or older, use a wheelchair or scooter as your primary means of mobility, and you have accessed a public transit bus using a wheelchair ramp similar to those shown below during the past three years, we welcome your participation in this survey. Or if you are a family member or personal assistant for someone who meets these criteria, you may complete this survey.

Find the survey at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/WheelchairRampSurvey> ●



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